

Assembly Joint Resolution No. 52

RESOLUTION CHAPTER 23

Assembly Joint Resolution No. 52—Relative to the Port Chicago disaster.

[Filed with Secretary of State April 6, 1998.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AJR 52, R. Wright. Port Chicago disaster.

This measure would memorialize Congress and the President of the United States to act to vindicate the sailors unjustly blamed for, and the sailors convicted of mutiny following, the Port Chicago disaster, and to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those sailors.

WHEREAS, On the night of July 17, 1944, two transport vessels loading ammunition at the Port Chicago naval base on the Sacramento River in California were suddenly engulfed in a gigantic explosion, the incredible blast of which wrecked the naval base and heavily damaged the town of Port Chicago, located 1.5 miles away; and

WHEREAS, Everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships was killed instantly—some 320 American naval personnel, 200 of whom were Black enlisted men; and another 390 military and civilian personnel were injured, including 226 Black enlisted men; and

WHEREAS, The two ships and the large loading pier were totally annihilated and an estimated \$12,000,000 in property damage was caused by the huge blast; and

WHEREAS, This single, stunning disaster accounted for nearly one-fifth of all Black naval casualties during the whole of World War II; and

WHEREAS, The specific cause of the explosion was never officially established by a Court of Inquiry, in effect clearing the officers-in-charge of any responsibility for the disaster and insofar as any human cause was invoked, laid the burden of blame on the shoulders of the Black enlisted men who died in the explosion; and

WHEREAS, Following the incident, many of the surviving Black sailors were transferred to nearby Camp Shoemaker where they remained until July 31, when two of the divisions were transferred to naval barracks in Vallejo near Mare Island; another division, which was also at Camp Shoemaker until July 31, returned to Port Chicago to help with the cleaning up and rebuilding of the base; and

WHEREAS, Many of these men were in a state of shock, troubled by the vivid memory of the horrible explosion; however, they were

provided no psychiatric counseling or medical screening, except for those who were obviously physically injured; none of the men, even those who had been hospitalized with injuries, was granted survivor leaves to visit their families before being reassigned to regular duties; and none of these survivors was called to testify at the Court of Inquiry; and

WHEREAS, Captain Merrill T. Kline, Officer-in-Charge of Port Chicago, issued a statement praising the African American enlisted men and stating that “the men displayed creditable coolness and bravery under those emergency conditions”; and

WHEREAS, After the disaster, white sailors were given 30 days’ leave to visit their families—according to survivors, this was the standard for soldiers involved in a disaster—while only African American sailors were ordered back to work the next day to clean and remove human remains; and

WHEREAS, After the disaster, the preparation of Mare Island for the arrival of African American sailors included moving the barracks of white sailors away from the loading area in order to be clear of the ships being loaded in case of another explosion; and

WHEREAS, The survivors and new personnel who later were ordered to return to loading ammunition expressed their opposition, citing the possibility of another explosion; the first confrontation occurred on August 9 when 328 men from three divisions were ordered out to the loading pier; the great majority of the men balked, and eventually 258 were arrested and confined for three days on a large barge tiered to the pier; and

WHEREAS, Fifty of these men were selected as the ring-leaders and charged with mutiny, and on October 24, 1944, after only 80 minutes of a military court, all 50 men were found guilty of mutiny—10 were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 24 sentenced to 12 years, 11 sentenced to 10 years, and five sentenced to eight years; and all were to be dishonorably discharged from the Navy; and

WHEREAS, After a massive outcry the next year, in January 1946, 47 of the Port Chicago men were released from prison and “exiled” for one year overseas before returning to their families; and

WHEREAS, In a 1994 investigation, the United States Navy stated that “there is no doubt that racial prejudice was responsible for the posting of only African American enlisted personnel to loading divisions at Port Chicago”; and

WHEREAS, In the 1994 investigation, the United States Navy, prompted by Members of Congress, admitted that the routine assignment of only African American enlisted personnel to manual labor was clearly motivated by race; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate and the Assembly of the State of California, jointly, That the Legislature of the State of California respectfully memorializes the Congress and the President of the United States to act to vindicate the sailors unjustly blamed for, and the sailors

convicted of mutiny following, the Port Chicago disaster, and to rectify any mistreatment by the military of those sailors; and be it further

Resolved, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of this resolution to the President and Vice President of the United States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and each Senator and Representative from California in the Congress of the United States.

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